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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that students and teachers can benefit from structured in-school helping relationships in which peers assume formal roles as tutors. For the student in need of academic help, peer tutoring programs provide an opportunity to learn in a more nonthreatening environment than the classroom. Immediate feedback and clarification of information is possible. For the student tutor, these programs reinforce their own knowledge, build their self-esteem, and develop a sense of responsibility. The experience may result in improved attitudes for both the tutor and the learner, and can also foster cross- cultural and interracial awareness. The use of peer tutors in the classroom can make teachers more flexible and enable them to better target their efforts toward individual students. Effective peer tutoring programs have used the follow steps to guide their work: (1) establish a planning group; (2) assess student needs; (3) develop measurable goals and objectives; (4) determine faculty, material, and equipment needs; (5) develop a draft plan for school staff and parental review; (6) formally present a revised plan; (7) conduct an orientation; and (8) conduct ongoing evaluation. Peer tutoring is an underutilized instructional strategy in urban schools. (VM)

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PEER HELPING RELATIONSHIPS IN URBAN SCHOOLS

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PEER HELPING RELATIONSHIPS IN URBAN SCHOOLS

Young people help each other in many different ways. Beginning in childhood, as they play together, children learn important lessons such as sharing, communicating, and cooperating. Now, research has shown that students can benefit from structured in-school helping relationships in which peers assume formal roles as tutors. The benefits derived from these experiences are usually mutually shared by the student helper and the student learner.

The History of Peer Tutoring

Although peer tutoring was standard practice in many American classrooms as early as the nineteenth century, there was little mention of it in educational literature until the 1960s. Several factors have helped to bring about a renewed and expanded interest in peer helping relationships, particularly in urban schools.

The passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 provided impetus for the creation of peer tutoring programs and practices designed to improve the academic performance of student populations such as limited English proficient students and low achieving students. In addition, during the 1960s there emerged a shift in American education toward learning relationships involving small groups and teaching methods most appropriate for the individual student.[1]

Desegregation efforts also sought to increase interracial understanding through diverse, structured peer relationships. Finally, a growing number of research studies demonstrated the positive outcomes of peer tutoring on student achievement.

More recently, in-school peer helping relationships have been viewed as a vehicle for diversifying and redefining the role of the classroom teacher, as a response to personnel and resource limitations and to facilitate learning through the powerful influence of peer relationships.

Student Benefits from Peer Tutoring

Peer tutoring consists of students teaching other students on a one-to-one basis, or one tutor working with two or three students simultaneously. The tutor may be the same age or in the same grade level as the student being tutored (same-age peers) or may be of a different age or grade (cross-age peers). Peer tutoring is a cooperative undertaking in which students share not only the answers but the process used to reach answers.

Students generally identify more easily with peer helpers than with adult authority figures.[2] Evidence has shown that modeling is an important dimension of peer tutoring.

> School children learn skills by observing their adult teachers, but observation of peer models may better enhance children's self-efficacy. In particular, an adult teacher flawlessly modeling cognitive skills may not promote high self-efficacy in children who have encountered previous difficulties with the subject matter and who view the teacher as superior in competence.[3]

Further, students being tutored benefit from receiving immediate clarification of information they don't understand, and feedback in a nonthreatening environment, free from the fear of teacher criticism or class ridicule.

As a result of their efforts to help others, tutors reinforce their own knowledge and skills, which in turn builds their self-confidence and self-esteem. Peer tutors also develop a sense of responsibility as a result of helping students to learn.[4] Finally, explaining the subject matter to others helps tutors better understand it themselves.

Both peer tutors and students being tutored have also reported improved attitudes toward school as a result of their participation.[5]

The use of peer tutors in the classroom can make teachers more flexible and enable them to better target their efforts toward individual students. They can introduce learning activities that could not be accommodated within their regular teaching load. Peer tutors, by assuming responsibility for the reinforcement of what has been covered in class by the teacher, or for remedial instruction, can free teachers for new roles as coordinators and facilitators, instead of their functioning solely as dispensers of knowledge.[6]

Enhancing the Effectiveness of Peer Tutoring

Numerous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of the peer tutoring relationship. Students in effective programs consistently reach higher levels of academic achievement than students in conventional learning, or mastery learning situations.[7]

While there is some evidence suggesting that benefits are greatest for students who have previously demonstrated difficulty in relating to their peers and students who lack experience in working cooperatively with others, neither the nature of the child being tutored nor the characteristics of the tutor seem to matter as much as the sense of "mutual reward," some of which may be intrinsic to the tutoring process.[8] Cross-age peer tutoring may be especially effective with those students whose cultural tradition includes an emphasis on the responsibility of older children for their younger siblings.[9] Others have postulated that while mixed race/ethnic pairings may result in more positive interethnic/racial relationships, a culture shared by two students of similar backgrounds may also contribute to the beneficial outcomes of peer tutoring.[10]

Peer tutoring programs have been incorporated into the regular classroom structure and as separate programs that take place in a laboratory, resource room, or tutoring center. The subject matter to be covered and the objectives of the program often determine the facilities and organization used.

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For example, in a regular classroom setting, while students are working with a peer tutor, other students may be involved in small groups or in individual study. In another case, the requirements of special education students may necessitate that peer tutoring take place in a resource room; or, peer tutoring programs with a science focus may require a laboratory facility.

While the research is not clear regarding the most effective organization for peer tutoring programs, it is clear that teacher planning, training, and management are critical and continuing factors in successful program implementation. Also, effective programs combine tutoring instruction with regularly scheduled assessment to provide feedback concerning the extent to which students being tutored have mastered the subject matter and to determine whether additional corrective work is required.[11]

Developing Effective Peer Tutoring Programs

First, planners should provide full information on the characteristics and benefits of peer tutoring programs in order to prevent the development of misconceptions and misunderstandings by those who will be involved—parents, administrators, teachers, and students. It is also important to obtain the early support of the school administration, as well as the authority to carry out program planning and implementation tasks.[12]

Effective programs have generally followed this process:

- ***Establish a planning group*** to collect suggestions and opinions, prepare written plans, and develop budgets.
- ***Assess student needs*** through discussions with faculty and staff, and a review of school records.
- ***Develop measurable program goals and objectives*** consistent with and supportive of the educational/social goals of the school.
- ***Determine facility, material, and equipment needs.***
- ***Determine personnel requirements.***
- ***Develop a draft plan*** for review by school authorities.
- ***Formally present the revised plan*** to teachers, parents, district administrators and other stakeholders.
- ***Conduct an orientation*** for students, faculty, and program staff to review tutor recruitment and selection; tutor training; procedures for student intake and referral; guidelines for matching and assigning students; and coordination of routine tasks (communication, monitoring and supervision, reporting, and public relations).
- ***Conduct ongoing evaluation*** following implementation to ensure continued improvement and consistent support.[13]

Despite an increase in peer tutoring programs over the last two decades, peer tutoring continues to be an underutilized instructional strategy in urban schools. Reasons for this may be that such programs alter the traditional and accepted roles of teachers and students, that programs are difficult to plan and implement, and that school personnel generally lack the training and support necessary for successful programs. Nevertheless, the demonstrated effectiveness of some tutoring programs suggests that efforts to create them can be well rewarded.

—Michael Webb

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